

we are golden by tempestbreak

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Alternate Universe - College/University, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Alternate Universe - Study Abroad, Anal Sex, Angst with a Happy Ending, Awkward Boners, Beverly Marsh & Richie Tozier Are Best Friends, Bisexual Richie Tozier, Blow Jobs, Collective Effervescence, Eventual Smut, Explicit Sexual Content, F/M, First Time, Fluff, Friends With Benefits, Friends to Lovers, Frottage, Gay Eddie Kaspbrak, Humor, Liberal Use of Song Lyrics, M/M, Minor Bill Denbrough/Beverly Marsh, Minor Bill Denbrough/Stanley Uris, Oblivious Richie Tozier, POV Richie Tozier, Romance, Sassy Stanley Uris, Slow Burn, Sonia Kaspbrak's A+ Parenting, Travel, Underage Drinking, according to U.S. laws but it's legal in Jordan, an Arabic lesson disguised as fanfiction, jokes about languages, just frowned upon, travel specifically for the purpose of boning, well kinda? it's 2010

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Myra Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

Relationships: Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Beverly Marsh & Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Mike Hanlon/Stanley Uris, Richie Tozier & Everyone, Richie Tozier & Stanley Uris

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Summary:

Richie and Eddie meet while on a study abroad semester in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Hijinks ensue, featuring drinking games, bad dancing, things getting lost in translation, personalized playlists, leather jackets, photo shoots in ancient ruins, karaoke, and one (1) gay bar.

1. january i: is this the place that i've been dreaming of?

Notes for the Chapter:

these boys are living in my head and i can't get them out. i thought i could survive just reading fanfiction or mayyybe i would write a oneshot about them if i came up with a good idea, but then this sprang into my head and i sighed and wailed and shook my fist at the sky and i demanded why?? WHY ME??

but turns out the dark lord has cursed me to write an arab world study abroad reddie AU so i wrote 42,000 words already and figured i should probably post it at some point. that's life i guess.

We are not what you think we are

We are golden

We are golden

MIKA – We Are Golden

Richie's eyes open as the plane touches down. They feel crusty and dry, and he's exhausted from nearly 24 hours of travel—from LAX to Atlanta to Paris to here—but he feels a rush nonetheless. He pulls his glasses out of the seat pocket, claps them on his face, flips open the window, and peers out. It's brown and dusty out there. It looks hot, even though it's January. It looks a little like parts of southern California, if he's being honest, but he's not home; he's halfway around the world.

He's here. He's in Jordan.

As soon as the plane slows down and begins taxiing, Richie hears the clinking sound of dozens of seatbelts coming undone. An announcement is made in French that Richie assumes is reminding them to *remain in their seats with their seatbelts securely fastened until they have reached the gate* but no one seems to care. Almost as one, the other passengers surge to their feet, already pulling down backpacks and suitcases even though *objects may have shifted during*

flight. Surprised but not one to be left out, Richie unfastens his own seatbelt and twists in his seat to get a look at the rest of the plane, watching everyone with interest.

The aisle is already crowded, even though the plane is still rolling along. Next to Richie, a bearded man in a dark suit checks his Blackberry. Farther back, a young man in a white *dishdasha* and red keffiyeh hefts his duffel bag over his shoulder. Two young women wearing stylish *hijabs* and dramatic makeup chat animatedly to each other. An older woman in black clutches the hands of two yawning children.

He can tell almost everyone is speaking Arabic, but it sounds nothing like the Modern Standard he's been learning in college. He thinks he picks up a couple phrases from the crash course he got in Jordanian dialect, but not much. Oh, well, that's kind of the point of studying abroad, right?

Only a few people remain seated in the rows behind Richie. About halfway back, he sees a young woman his age with a short shock of curly orange hair looking around with just as much interest as he is. Their eyes meet, and she quirks up an eyebrow at him, giving a smile. He grins back at her. He's not sure what, but there's something exciting about her. He hopes she's here for AmmanAbroad, too.

Before he can look away, she winks and points a finger across the aisle. He manages to crane his neck around the other passengers and catch a glimpse of another fish out of water: a young guy, with dark eyebrows and brown hair in a neat side part, looking disdainfully at the standing passengers. He's sitting firmly in his aisle seat, arms crossed over his red polo, even though the other two people in his row are standing, hunched under the overhead console, and clearly attempting to crowd him out. This guy is studiously ignoring them. Richie can't stifle a laugh at this kid's stubbornness.

Somehow—despite the noise of the other passengers' chatter, the thud of bags being pulled to the ground, the hum of the plane's engine—this guy seems to hear Richie's laugh. Their eyes meet.

It's weird, but Richie feels his heart leap. A blush creeps to his face. Okay, the guy is really fucking cute, even though he looks pissed as

hell.

Richie smiles slightly and lifts his head in acknowledgment. In response, the guy raises his eyebrows and lifts one hand, gesturing about them as if in disbelief at the entire plane's blatant disregard for airplane safety.

And Richie gets where he's coming from. He does. He *could* just nod in commiseration and give the guy what he wants. But something about this guy's face—maybe his incredulous expression, maybe his petulant, downturned mouth, maybe his dark, fiery eyes—makes Richie want to annoy him even more. Want to poke at him. Just to *see*.

So Richie does the most irritating thing he can think of under the circumstances. He raises a hand, holds out his thumb and pinky finger in the “hang ten” sign, and wiggles it. He even sticks out his tongue for good measure.

To Richie's delight, the guy's mouth drops open in incredulous horror. Richie laughs, and he distantly hears the redheaded girl behind him laugh, too.

Eventually, they pull into the gate and begin deplaning. Once he makes it to the aisle, Richie drags his too-heavy backpack down from the overhead bin. Before filing off, he chances one last look over his shoulder. The redheaded girl has put on some oversized, electric-blue headphones and is bopping along to her music, mouthing the words. The angry guy is finally standing, now that the plane is safely at the gate, and somehow his smug expression perfectly encapsulates the sentiment of *See? How hard was it to wait?*

As he is carried along with the flow of deplaning passengers, Richie hopes he hasn't seen the last of either of them.

After stopping in the bathroom for a quick piss and to jam a yellow beanie over his copious staticky hair, Richie trots along with the crowd, following signs for Customs. He tries occasionally to read the Arabic lettering above the English, but usually can't read it fast enough before he's walked on past it. He does manage to interpret the Arabic for “duty-free” after seeing it a few times and gives

himself a pat on the back for that.

At Customs, he pays for a visa with some of the Jordanian dinars his mom exchanged for him before he left and gets in line for passport control. After a few minutes in line, he notices that his good pal, Angry Guy, is in the next line over. Now that they're near each other, he can tell that Angry Guy is shorter than him and somewhat slight, although Richie thinks he can see the faint outline of a tricep peeking out from under his polo sleeves. He's chewing on his bottom lip, staring straight ahead with a slight frown. He looks shockingly put together for having traveled probably about as long as Richie has. Richie has an inexplicable urge to give him a noogie.

"Hey. Shaggy."

Richie feels a light tug on his overshirt—which today has palm fronds on it because he thought it would be festive—and turns around. The redheaded girl from the plane is giving him a little wave around the French businessman who's between them in line. Her bright blue headphones are hanging around her neck, music still faintly playing.

"'Shaggy'?" Richie raises an eyebrow. "It wasn't me."

She laughs. "I meant more like from *Scooby-Doo*, since you're tall and skinny and have all that hair, but that works, too," she says. "I'm Beverly. Call me Bev. You here for AmmanAbroad?"

"Richard, call me Richie." He smiles. "And yes."

"Nice, I was hoping you were," she says, her eyes sparkling. "That 'cowabunga' you threw to Red Polo over there was hilarious."

He grins, reaching out to shake her hand. "Only about three in ten people think I'm hilarious instead of incredibly annoying, so the pleasure is all mine, Bev." They shuffle forward as the line moves. He turns back to her. "So, if I'm Shaggy, does that make you Daphne?"

"Multiple online quizzes would tell you I'm actually more of a Fred," Bev says airily, "although I did once get Scrappy-Doo. It was my greatest shame."

Richie laughs. "AmmanAbroad, huh? What about Angry Guy, do you

know if he's a fellow classmate?" he asks. "I suppose you know him as Red Polo."

"Angry Red Polo Guy, yes," Bev says, nodding. "No idea if he's with us or not. I noticed him across the aisle when he pushed the flight attendant button to ask for hot water with lemon because apparently the air in the plane was too dry."

"A total Velma."

"Oh, *biig* Velma energy."

Richie turns to look when Angry Guy gets called up to the next kiosk. He slides his passport across the desk, and Richie can just barely hear him greet the Jordanian customs agent in prim Modern Standard Arabic. What a dweeb.

Richie and Bev make some more small talk while they wait—"Where are you from?" (Richie: Southern California; Bev: Las Vegas but she goes to school in Seattle), "What's your major?" (Richie: theater; Bev: fashion design and marketing), "What year are you in?" (both juniors)—before Richie gets called up. His customs agent is personable and welcoming; he seems pleasantly surprised by Richie's attempt at Arabic, and Richie even gets a laugh out of him before he stamps his passport and waves him through to baggage claim.

"*Ahlan wa sahlán*," the agent welcomes him cheerily with a wave. "Welcome to Jordan."

"*Shukran!*" Richie thanks him.

As Richie emerges from passport control into the baggage claim area, a great crowd of people comes into view. Most are clearly family members waiting to greet returning siblings, parents, and spouses, but there are also several suited men holding signs with last names like LAURENT and HADDAD and MOREAU and BANI HASSAN. Richie strolls along, scanning the signs for his name.

At first, he doesn't see the sign. Instead, he sees a red polo, a sensibly sized backpack, and neatly combed brown hair; Angry Guy, looking decidedly less angry at the moment, is talking to a slim man in a dark

blue suit who's holding a sign with a familiar logo on it.

Richie strides up and grins as he peeks his head around Angry Guy's shoulder. "AmmanAbroad?" he asks, pointing to the sign the man is holding.

Angry Guy actually jumps in surprise. When Richie glances at him, he's staring back at Richie, frowning slightly.

"Yes, you must be Richie!" The man with the sign smiles, holding out a hand. He looks about thirty, and he's softly handsome, with dark brown eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, gelled hair, and a scar across his chin. "I'm Saleh, the housing director for AmmanAbroad. Welcome to Jordan."

"Saleh?" Richie repeats, trying it out. It's a hard name for him to pronounce, with an emphatic S *and* an emphatic H, two non-English sounds. Richie sticks the tip of his tongue to the roof of his mouth, trying again: "Saleh. *Saleh*. Fuck—sorry, I meant, dang it—I suck at this."

Saleh laughs. "No problem, it's a hard one for Americans."

"Sa— Oh, I think I got it— *Saa*— Nope, lemme try again— *SAA... SSA-LEHH?* Nope. No, that was even worse." He laughs at himself; Saleh looks amused. "I'll work on it."

So far, Richie can see from quick glances out of the corner of his eye that Angry Guy has just been observing him in silence, his eyes narrowed and his brow slightly furrowed, like he thinks he knows Richie from somewhere but can't quite place it.

Richie can no longer pretend to ignore him. He turns to look down at him, and their eyes meet for the second time. Angry Guy's eyes are brown, but not the way Richie's are brown, which Richie describes saucily to others as *dark chocolate* but always made him think more of *mud*. No, this is a warm, golden brown, like a hazelnut, like a light-roast coffee, like caramel. Richie gulps, feeling that blush creep up his neck again, as those eyes continue to regard him searchingly. Richie realizes he might not recognize him from the plane, with his yellow beanie on.

“All right, now that I’ve made a complete fool of myself, what’s *your* name, new friend?” he asks with a grin, extending a hand and trying to fight down the warmth in his ears. “And please don’t say, like, Cadwaladr or Quetzalcoatl or something, I’ve got enough on my plate already.”

After a second’s hesitation, Angry Guy, still lightly frowning, shakes Richie’s hand firmly. His hand is soft and warm. “Edward Kaspbrak,” he says crisply. “I go by Eddie.”

And, okay, Richie *wants* to be cool in front of this guy. He *wants* to take in stride the fact that this cute guy in a polo and fucking *khakis* (who the hell wears *khakis* on a transatlantic flight?) just introduced himself using his full first and last name, like his mom probably taught him to, like Richie is someone he met at a networking event at *Hahh-vahd*, which is totally how he’d pronounce it. He *wants* to be cool, he really fucking does, but...

“Edward Kaspbrak, you say?” he asks, unable to stop the grin from spreading across his face, and, oh no, is that his Hoity-Toity Country Club Voice beginning to creep in? “Of the Philadelphia Kaspbraks?”

Eddie frowns even more deeply at him. “No, I’m from, uh, Derry? It’s in Maine—”

Richie clasps his other hand over their joined hands and starts shaking them exuberantly. “Oh, the *Derry* Kaspbraks, oh, rah-ther!” and okay, it’s not his normal Country Club Douche Voice, it’s like full-blown Frasier Crane now, it’s some fucking Katharine-Hepburn-in-*High-Society* shit, but he can’t stop it spilling out of his mouth. “How droll, how *ever* so droll to run into you *here*, Edward, my good man. Richard Tozier. Don’t you remember me? From the yacht club?”

Eddie and Saleh are both silent, taken aback; Eddie’s arm is practically flapping as Richie shakes it up and down, but he seems so stunned by whatever the fuck Richie’s doing that he doesn’t even notice.

“What—? I don’t—”

“Do you know each other?” Saleh asks, tentatively positive.

“No, I— I have no— Derry doesn’t even *have* a yacht club—”

“Now, that’s not very sporting of you, Edward. Surely you must recognize me. We sailed around the cape together and afterwards took in a talkie at the *thee-ay-tah*. It was absolutely spiffing, old chap, although the rest of the audience refused to stay in their seats. A real safety hazard, wouldn’t you say, my good man?” And because Richie has lost control of the bit, really lost the fucking plot by this point, he has to fucking wink, too.

Everything—the Voice, the wink, the overlong, overenthusiastic handshake—they all hang there in space for a silent moment that stretches into infinity, knotting up in his intestines like a game of Snake, folding in on themselves in that infinitesimal silence, and suddenly it dawns on Richie that he’s already blown it with two new people, he’s failed, he’s too much, as always, he’s *wrong*, and—

And Eddie gasps, breaking the silence. His eyes widen in recognition. “You’re that weirdo from the plane!” he exclaims, pointing an accusatory finger. “The one who stuck his tongue out at me. *In front of strangers.*”

The knot of terror inside Richie untangles fast and clean, like a bow. Relieved laughter bursts out of him so suddenly that it takes even Richie by surprise. Spit flies. Eddie flinches back, finally jerking his hand out of Richie’s grasp. He wipes furiously at his face. “And now you’re the fucking weirdo who just spat in my fucking face. Thanks a lot, asshole.”

That makes Richie laugh even harder. What a fucking one-eighty from *Edward Kaspbrak* to *fuckity-fuck-fuck-you*. “Wow, that’s a mouth on you,” Richie says, delighted. “You should watch your fucking language, man.”

Eddie’s expression is getting progressively angrier. “And *you* should watch your fucking bodily *fluids*, *man!* The fuck’s wrong with you? Why are you laughing so hard? It’s not fucking funny, dude, I could get the flu or TB or something. Stop laughing, it’s true, I saw it online!”

Richie has to bend over and rest his hands on his knees, he’s laughing

so hard. He was afraid of the silence, afraid of being overwhelming, but actually, somehow, it's this Eddie—Angry-Red-Polo-Caramel-Eyes *Eddie*—who won't shut up now, and there's something so rich and so comforting about how he fills that terrible silence with rage and cursing instead of jokes and Voices that Richie feels almost lightheaded. He doesn't want it to end.

"You saw it online, huh?" Richie gasps, just to keep him going. "Is that where you got your medical degree, Dr. Kaspbrak?"

"You don't have to be a doctor to know the bare fucking minimum about disease prevention! There's nothing funny about TB, asshole, more than a million people die of it *every year*. I bet you didn't even wash your hands after you got off the plane, did you? That's like public health 101!"

"Hello!" Richie hears Saleh say. His tone says he's eager to move past whatever the hell is going on with Richie and Eddie. "Are you Beverly?"

"Sure am! What'd I miss?"

Breathless, Richie manages to stop laughing long enough to stand up. Bev has finally arrived and is looking around at them with an inquisitive smile. There's something about her bright, freckled face that makes Richie feel even warmer inside.

"Ah, Bevvie," Richie sighs, "only the most romantic meet cute of all time."

"Yeah," Eddie bites out, rolling his eyes, "this goddamn walking disease here spat in my fucking face."

"A real *When Harry Met Sally* moment," Richie says sincerely.

Bev's smile widens as her eyes flicker back and forth between them. "Forget Velma," she says, "I think I might have found my Scrappy-Doo twin."

Richie laughs, and laughs even harder when Eddie demands, heated, "The *fuck* is that supposed to mean??"

Saleh manages to usher them to the baggage claim, where the three of them locate their bags in good time, and then out into the dusty air of the Queen Alia Airport taxi pickup area. It's actually cooler than it looks outside, with a slight breeze. Some baby palm trees squat in the median across the road amid scraggly brush. Richie points them out to Eddie and Bev and then gestures to the matching pattern on his shirt with a proud grin. Bev gives him a thumbs up; Eddie only rolls his eyes.

Saleh authoritatively approaches a man in a linen button-down who's leaning against a green-and-yellow taxi and, after some quick bargaining in Jordanian Arabic that goes well over Richie's head, the driver nods, pops the trunk, and skirts the taxi to get in behind the wheel.

Saleh turns back to Richie, Bev, and Eddie. "You can put your bags in the trunk there," he says. "It'll be about a forty-five-minute drive to the hotel, and then you'll have a few hours to yourselves before we meet for dinner with the other two students, who are getting in this evening."

"Ooh, mystery students. I hope they're as cute as my good chum Edward Kaspbrak the Third, here," Richie says, resting a hand on Eddie's shoulder.

Eddie shrugs him off right away. "I hope they have some fucking manners." Saleh briefly gives them both an uncertain look as Eddie drags his suitcases toward the taxi.

"Well, *I* hope they don't immediately come up with some weird schtick that only the two of them seem to think is funny," Bev remarks lightly.

"Only one of them, actually," Eddie shouts over his shoulder.

The three of them pile in to the backseat, which is covered in thick plastic. Somehow Richie ends up in the middle, even though Eddie and Bev are way smaller. He's hunched forward, hugging his knobby knees, which are practically at his chin. Saleh gets in up front and starts giving the driver directions.

“Um, excuse me...” Eddie’s tone is surprisingly polite for the first time since he introduced himself, so Richie turns to look at him. Eddie has his seatbelt in his hand and seems to be trying to find the receptacle for it under Richie’s hip. “Could you please get your lanky ass out of my personal space so I could buckle my seatbelt and not die?”

“I’m doing my best, man,” Richie says, trying to twist even farther out of his way, “but there’s only so many places for it to go.”

“Any luck over there, guys?” Bev asks. Richie looks over his shoulder at her and sees she’s holding her unfastened seatbelt, too.

Richie reaches his hand down under his ass and tries to feel for the seatbelt things, whatever the fuck they’re called. No dice. “I think the plastic’s covering them,” he says.

Eddie’s head jerks up at that, his brown eyes wide. The seatbelt is still clutched tightly in his hand. “So we’re supposed to just ride in the backseat of a strange cab with *no seatbelts*?”

Richie manages to somehow fight down the laugh that wants to escape again at Eddie’s expression. He holds out his hands, gesturing broadly to the brave new world around them. “*Ahlan wa sahlán*, Eds,” he says expansively. Bev laughs.

Eddie’s expression turns angry in a split second. “That’s not my name,” he bites back, “and your pronunciation fucking sucks.”

It just makes Richie want to laugh even harder.

“Don’t worry, Eddie,” Bev says from his other side, barely stifling a laugh herself. “I’m sure this guy’s a safe driver.”

As if on cue, Saleh and the driver finish their discussion, and the taxi practically peels out, swerving immediately into the flow of airport traffic amid a chorus of honks. Eddie yelps and slides against Richie, still clutching the useless seatbelt.

The sensation of Eddie’s body against Richie’s is electric. He’s solid and warm up against Richie’s suddenly pounding chest, his soft brown hair brushing against Richie’s clenching jaw. One of Eddie’s

hands flies to Richie's thigh to brace himself, and Richie can feel his skin tingling under his grasp. He has a sudden urge to bury his face in Eddie's brown hair, to snake an arm around him and pull him close, whisper in his ear something silly like *I'll be your seatbelt, don't worry, I'll keep you safe, you beautiful little nerd—*

But Saleh turns around at Eddie's yelp. "Ah, yeah," he says sympathetically, seeing Eddie smushed against Richie, "Jordanian driving can take some getting used to for American students. And some cabs you're in might not have seatbelts in the backseat."

"Yeah, thanks for the heads up!" Eddie pushes himself off Richie and grasps onto the handle above the window, holding on for dear life.

Richie and Bev give each other a look before bursting into laughter together.

They manage to get to the hotel without anyone dying, although Eddie's grip on the handle doesn't loosen much for the whole forty-five-minute drive. The driver turns on the radio when they're on the highway, and Richie is shocked that he actually recognizes the singer as Umm Kulthum, an iconic Egyptian performer that they learned about in his Arabic class. It turns out Saleh is a big fan of hers and is delighted that Richie knows who she is, so they chat amiably about her until they pull up in front of the Geneva Hotel, a hulking, rectangular concrete building with square windows.

"This is a part of West Amman called as-Sweifieh," Saleh announces as soon as they're out of the cab, their bags on the sidewalk beside them.

"Sweifieh," Richie tries out immediately. It's the same emphatic S sound as Saleh's name. "*Sssweifieh—*"

"Please don't fucking start that again," Eddie says, squirting some Purell on his hands and rubbing it in. "I just nearly died, I don't need to listen to you butcher more Arabic. It's easy. As-Sweifieh."

"Oh, of course, perfect Mr. Edward Kaspbrak the Third gets it in

one,” Richie says, “but us plebes need to practice. *Ssswei*—”

“Oh my *god*, you are so annoying. Are you seriously going to be like this the whole semester? And I’m not ‘the Third’, asshole, that’s such a stupid joke.”

“The AmmanAbroad offices are about a fifteen-minute walk from here,” Saleh continues, clearly deciding to try to ignore Richie and Eddie for the time being. He gestures for them to follow him through the sliding glass doors of the hotel. “So you won’t have to take a cab to get there during orientation. Dinner tonight is also walking distance; I’ll come back around seven to walk you there.”

“How long before we move in with our host families?” Bev asks as they follow Saleh to the front desk.

“Thursday,” Saleh replies. Today is Saturday, which Richie thinks seems like a long time for orientation—or, then again, maybe no time at all. “First you’ll learn about Amman and study abroad in general, and take your diagnostic tests, and so on, then you’ll move in. *Ahlan*,” he greets the woman behind the desk.

“*Ahlan fik*,” she replies courteously, and Saleh gets them checked into their rooms and hands them their keys. Their room numbers are all different.

“Wow, our own rooms, huh? Swanky,” Richie comments as he takes his key. He’s not sure whether he’s disappointed or relieved to be in a different room from Eddie.

Saleh chuckles and shakes his head. “Enjoy it while you can,” he says. “Once the other students arrive, you and Eddie will have roommates.”

“So that means two more boys?” Bev asks, a little dismayed. “Damn, it’s gonna be a real sausage party here, isn’t it?”

“Actually, with the other two new students, and the two who stayed from last semester, you are the only female student this semester, Beverly,” Saleh says delicately, like he’s breaking bad news. “I hope that won’t be too difficult for you...”

“Only seven students total?” Eddie mutters under his breath. “That’s pretty small.”

“And you would know about being small, wouldn’t you, Eds?”

“That’s not my *fucking* name, asshole.”)

“Eh, whatever,” Bev says with a shrug. “Guess I’ll just get used to being one of the guys.”

Saleh looks a little uncertain. “Tomorrow you’ll meet Huda, our program manager,” he says after a beat. “She can be a good resource for you, if you get frustrated being the only female student.”

“Can *I* talk to Huda if I get frustrated being on the same study abroad trip as *him*?” Eddie asks, jerking a thumb at Richie.

“Oh, please, the lad doth protest too much,” Richie says, grinning. “You love me already, I can tell.”

“And what exactly is there to love? Your complete disregard for public health and safety? Your insistence on practicing every single Arabic word *out loud*? Your *physical inability* to get my name right?”

“Wow, you were able to come up with three very lovable things about me right off the bat, Eds. You must be head over heels.”

“You are fucking impossible.”

“And a fourth! Amazing.”

Saleh shifts on his feet uncomfortably. “Obviously, if you want to lodge a complaint or request mediation, Huda would be the right person to—”

“That won’t be necessary,” Richie says, waving a hand, at the same time Eddie says, “When can I fucking start?”

Saleh looks back and forth between them uncertainly. “Well, I suppose tomorrow would be a good time to talk to Huda, if you want,” he finally says, checking his watch, “but I need to get going, to prepare some other materials for orientation tomorrow. Like I said,

I'll see you all at seven, *inshallah*."

"Bye, Saleh, thanks," Bev calls after him. Richie and Eddie also wave as he leaves through the sliding glass doors.

After he's gone, Bev turns to them with a raised eyebrow. "You two can't, like, chill out for even one second and not scare our program staff?"

"He started it!" Eddie says, at the same time as Richie says, "It's not me, it's him."

"Oh my god, you have to stop or *I'm* going to complain about you," she says, but she smiles a second later. She turns toward the elevators, pulling her bags behind her. "Come on, you losers, let's find our rooms. I need to take a fucking nap."

"I need a shower—" Richie mutters.

("Yes, you do," Eddie interjects.)

"—*and* a nap."

"I need to let my mom know I got here safely," Eddie says, pressing the *up* button to call the elevator. "What do you think the internet's like here?"

"No clue, but please give your mom my best," Richie says, yawning.

"My mom is already freaked out enough about me coming to the Arab world," Eddie says, crossing his arms, "I'm not telling her I'm studying abroad with some tall-ass idiot who thinks spraying me with his bodily fluids is an appropriate greeting."

Richie grins as they get in the elevator. "Your mom is already well aware of my greeting preferences, Eds, but I don't usually spray her with *saliva*, if you know what I mean."

Eddie scrunches his face up in disgust. He raises one flat hand up near his face, like he wants to karate chop Richie. "Are you seriously — *are you seriously*—" he grits it out, the hand shaking by his face "—referring to *spraying* my *mother* with... *what?* Your *urine*??"

“Well, sometimes, she is into that, but what I *meant* was—”

“You’re fucking disgusting! What the hell is wrong with you? I should have demanded that program manager woman’s fucking *personal phone number* from Saleh, I need to call her *right now* and tell her there’s no way—”

Beverly startles both of them by abruptly reaching out and checking the room numbers on their keys: 622 and 624. She taps her own—626—against her palm. “What do you think, guys? Any chance these aren’t together? Because if your yelling prevents me from taking this nap, I am totally gonna lose my shit.”

“Don’t worry, Bev,” Eddie says over his shoulder, breezing through the opening elevator doors and striding down the hallway ahead of them, “once I’m inside my room I’m throwing up the fucking *chain lock*, and I’ll make sure to scream only into my pillow.”

“Like mother like son,” Richie calls. Eddie flips him off and disappears around a corner. Richie turns to Bev with a grin.

She raises an eyebrow at him. “You might wanna cool it, Shaggy,” she says with a smirk. “You’re coming on a little strong.”

Richie feels a blush creep up his neck. “Is it too trite to say, ‘It wasn’t me,’ again?”

She laughs.

“Am I that obvious?” he asks sheepishly.

She rubs his back comfortingly. “Probably not so much *obvious*. More *obnoxious*. It was like you wanted to push him down on the playground or something.”

“Ugh, you see right through me, Beverly,” he groans, pulling his beanie down to hide his red face. “I can’t help it. I see someone cute, and I just regress.”

“Well, I would be offended, but I’m a little relieved I’m not on the receiving end of kindergarten Richie’s idea of flirting.”

“Bevvie, *you* are not cute. *You* are perfect,” Richie says meaningfully, pulling the beanie away from his face. “A literal angel here on Earth. One look at you and I knew you were so far out of the realm of possibility for me that you could only be, like, my sister.”

Her brow furrows slightly, like she’s surprised by the sincerity, and then she smiles widely, warmly. Her eyes are soft as she looks at Richie.

“So I really suck at Arabic,” she says after a beat, shifting her backpack on her shoulder. “I only started taking classes last semester, and I know, like, absolutely nothing. It’s embarrassing. So, I know we learned it, like I remember the lesson and everything, but I forget... How do you say ‘my brother’ and ‘my sister’ in Arabic, again?”

Richie sees Bev’s eyes sparkle, and he smiles slowly. “‘My sister’ is *ukhti*,” he says. “‘My brother’ is *akhi*.”

“Well, *akhi*,” she says, patting him on the back and nudging him down the corridor, “let’s get to our rooms so your *ukht* here can catch some motherfucking Z’s before she has to cut a bitch.”

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks so very much to my beta reader and soulmate @jajs, who didn't expect to still be humoring my weird obsessions by this point in our lives.

please PLEASE leave a comment to tell me how you liked it, because comments make carrying out lucifer’s dark bidding infinitely more bearable. <3 also i’m on instagram @tempestbreak. i have like nothing there yet but i'm thinking moodboards for "we are golden" and, idk, like my astrology ramblings?? richie is a leo rising, fight me.

next time on "we are golden": richie is jetlagged! eddie is a fancy boy who speaks propah!

words we learned today, class:

ahlan: hello, hi [generic greeting]

ahlan fiik: hello to you [response to "ahlan"]

ahlan wa sahan: welcome

akhi: my brother

shukran: thank you

ukhti: my sister

2. january ii: what's a boy supposed to do when i can't seem to leave you alone

Once he gets to his room, Richie does manage to get in a quick shower before absolutely passing out on one of the beds without even getting under the covers. Dreams don't come. It's like he's dead.

Sometime later, he jerks up off the bed, his still-damp hair plastered to his face. It's dark in the room, and someone is pounding at his door.

"Richie!" Through the hazy fog of interrupted sleep he recognizes Bev's voice. "C'mon, it's almost seven! We have to meet Saleh downstairs!"

"Uhh, I'll see you down there!" he shouts back, his voice hoarse. He fumbles for his glasses, slides them on, and turns on the light, blinking owlishly.

He hears, muffled through the door, Eddie's voice saying, "I *told* you he'd be late, he seems like a guy who's *always* late," before their footsteps fade away.

Richie sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. It's eerily quiet in the room. He had his iTunes on when he fell asleep, but his laptop must have run out of battery long ago. The silence sets Richie's teeth on edge.

He finds his iPod and turns it on without earbuds attached so tinny sound leaks from it—*careless in our summer clothes / splashing around in the muck and the mire*—and starts trying to get ready as quickly as he can despite being stupid from sleep. If it's almost seven, he slept for like *three hours* and still feels like he could use another ten. His eyes are both crusty and watering. His head is full of cotton balls.

He clumsily pulls on a fresh T-shirt and a purple button-down. He carries the iPod with him to the bathroom and splashes water in his face, which doesn't wake him up, and tries to do something with his hair, which he fell asleep on wet and is a lost cause. He jams his trusty beanie back on, checks mechanically that he has his wallet,

and stumbles out of the room and into the elevator, where he nearly falls asleep standing up.

In the lobby, to his surprise, he finds only Bev and Eddie waiting for him, lounging in armchairs. They stand up as he trudges over.

“It’s about fucking time,” Eddie says, looking Richie up and down with a frown. “Saleh had to go on ahead because he felt bad leaving the other students to wait for him to get us. Now we have to catch another fucking *death cab* by ourselves.”

“A death cab for the cutie,” Richie mumbles. He yawns and leans hard on Bev’s shoulder, eyelids drooping.

Bev chuckles. “C’mon, let’s get going,” she says. “I feel about as tired as you look. The sooner we have dinner, the sooner we can sleep.”

The three of them exit the hotel, Richie only half-listening to Eddie lecturing them about how they shouldn’t have taken naps during the day, it’s just going to make it harder for them to adjust to the time difference, and did they know sunlight helps with jetlag, before a taxi mercifully pulls up in front of the hotel. Eddie purposefully gets into the front seat and clicks his functional seatbelt triumphantly, while Bev and Richie pile in the back again.

“*Ahlan*,” Richie greets the driver, the way he heard Saleh do earlier.

“Hello,” says the driver in gruff English, looking at them in the rearview mirror. “Where you go?”

“**If you please,**” Eddie says in crisp, proper Modern Standard Arabic, “**we desire to travel to the restaurant Lebni Snack in as-Sweifieh.**”

Richie catches the driver’s glance at Eddie and small quirk of his eyebrow before he nods and pulls away from the curb.

“You sound so fucking fancy, man,” Richie says sleepily once they’re under way, slouching up against the window with his arms crossed. “Don’t you know any dialect?”

Eddie twists in his seat to look back at Richie. “We only had MSA

classes at my school,” he says, a little defensively. “It can’t really be all that different.”

“Yeah, dude, it can. You were basically like, ‘Prithee, good sir, wouldst thou deign to escort us to yonder eatery?’”

“I thought you sounded great, Eddie, way better than I could do,” Bev says.

Eddie ignores her. “How was I *supposed* to say it then, genius?”

“I dunno, but there’s like totally different verbs and shit for ‘want’ and ‘go’ and whatever.”

“Well, he understood me, didn’t he? We’re going to the fucking restaurant, aren’t we??”

“How the fuck would *we* know that?”

“I’m sure we’ll be there any minute, guys, chill,” Bev says calmly. Her voice is tired, both *in general* and *of their shit*.

Eddie turns back around after that, and Richie spends the trip watching street lights go by. The radio is inexplicably playing Akon.

Of course, they do make it to *the restaurant Lebni Snack in as-Sweifieh*, as Eddie so primly requested. The neon sign is in both English and Arabic surrounding a circular, red-and-green logo of a tree. Saleh is standing nervously outside the restaurant when they pull up, but he looks relieved when he sees them arrive. He leans down by Eddie’s window with a smile.

“You made it,” he says. “How was your first taxi ride by yourselves?”

“Great, this time I had a seatbelt,” Eddie replies as he undoes it and opens his door.

“What do we owe him?” Bev leans forward over the center console.

“Three JD,” says the driver, his eyes in the rearview mirror.

Richie starts to dig into his wallet, but Saleh frowns and leans in

Eddie's open door. "*Tlat dinaneer, 'an jad?*" Richie hears him ask, and he's not sure what it means but he can tell Saleh's tone is annoyed. The driver shrugs and responds in Arabic, and Saleh shoots back in even faster Jordanian dialect. Richie and Bev are frozen in the back, watching the altercation unfold.

Eventually, Saleh makes a frustrated noise and gives the driver two bills, stepping away from the door so Eddie can get out. Richie and Bev take their cue to get out, as well, and join Saleh on the curb. He lets out a deep breath, but doesn't say anything. The quiet prickles at Richie's spine.

"So, clearly we fucked up," Richie says.

"No, you didn't," Saleh says quickly, holding out a placating hand. "I should have told you to make sure he turned on the meter. Especially since I knew you were going to be hailing it from in front of a hotel. I'm sorry."

"I'm sure it wasn't your fault, Saleh," Richie says, patting him on the shoulder. "It was probably because we were riding with Little Lord Fauntleroy, here." He jerks a thumb at Eddie, who flips him off.

"Nah, we were clearly rubes, and we got ripped off," Bev says with a shrug. "Cabs are the same everywhere. Some good, some bad. C'mon, let's get some fucking food. I am all about the basic human needs today."

Saleh pulls a glass door open for them and holds it as they file in. Inside, Lebni Snack appears to be a somewhat upscale fast-food restaurant: metal tables and chairs, off-white tile, pictures of the food on the walls. It's mostly empty, although a lone middle-aged man is smoking in the corner, a red tray of wrappers and napkins before him. Music echoes thinly through the restaurant.

Two young men seated awkwardly at a central table look up, bleary-eyed yet alert, when Richie, Eddie, and Bev enter. One, with messy, sandy blond hair and an earnest face, lifts a hand and waves uncertainly until Bev peers around Richie, when he freezes, goggling. The other, with close-cropped black hair and an easy smile, slowly stands and reaches out to shake Richie's hand as he approaches.

“Hey, I’m Mike,” he says, smiling. His hand is dry and callused and somehow makes Richie feel soft and safe simultaneously.

“Mike? I’m Richie. Pleasure.” He turns to the other guy. “And you are...?”

“Uh, Ben.” He stands abruptly, his chair scraping on the tile. “Nice to meet you, Richie,” he says, shaking Richie’s hand almost shyly. His eyes flicker over Richie’s shoulder and he runs a hand nervously through his hair, making it stand on end with residual airplane static.

“You, too, man.”

After a beat, Eddie crosses his arms, looking at Richie. “Oh, so you *are* capable of introducing yourself to someone normally.”

Mike and Ben look at Eddie quizzically, and Richie laughs. “You’ll have to excuse my associate, Edward Kaspbrak the Third,” he says, resting a hand on Eddie’s shoulder. “He’s recently retired from a life in the circus and isn’t used to meeting normies. Not sure if you could tell, but he was a fire-breather.”

Eddie brushes his hand off. “Okay, asshole, between the two of us, *who* do you think is more likely to have been in the circus? The person wearing a polo shirt or the person who looks like a fucking clown school dropout?”

“If I dropped out, clearly I couldn’t have been in the circus, Eds.”

“That’s not my fucking name. Don’t make people think that’s my fucking name.”

“My name is Beverly.” Bev pushes between them and sticks a hand out with a smile. She shakes hands with Mike and then Ben, who turns pink to the tips of his ears and stammers that it’s nice to meet her. “It’s best if you stop these two before they get any momentum going,” she says, gesturing to Richie and Eddie. “They’re like a runaway truck going downhill.”

“That is how it feels, talking to him,” Eddie mutters.

“Aw, that’s so romantic, Eds. We’re a regular Thelma and Louise.”

Eddie sighs and forcefully grabs Ben's hand, shaking it strongly up and down. "Edward Kaspbrak. I go by Eddie. Not 'Edward Kaspbrak the Third' or 'Eds' or 'Thelma' or 'Louise'. It's a *pleasure* to meet you." His teeth are gritted.

Ben looks like he doesn't know whether to be amused or scared. "Nice to meet you, too, Eddie."

Once Mike and Eddie are formally introduced, too, Saleh gestures for them all to take their seats. Richie chivalrously pulls out Eddie's chair for him, and Eddie pointedly chooses another one, across the table. Richie grins and sits in the one he pulled out, legs splayed, and drags a menu over.

He's immediately overwhelmed. It's in both Arabic and English, but the English isn't all that helpful. What's "manqousheh"? What's "mutabbal"? What does "dough meat" mean? That cotton ball feeling in his head is back. He pushes the menu away, blinking.

"What's good here, Saleh?" he asks. "*Ssalehh*?"

Eddie sighs loudly into his menu.

Saleh smiles. "Hey, that was pretty good," he says. "Lots of stuff is good here. Let me know if you have any questions about any of the items."

"Um, I think all of it," Ben says sheepishly. "I'm kind of new to Arabic, and I don't know what most of this stuff is."

"Heck yeah, me, too," Bev says brightly. She holds a hand up. "High-five, fellow Arabic new kid." Ben blushes and gives it to her.

"What are you going to get, Saleh?" Mike asks.

Saleh points to a line on Mike's menu. "*Shawarma saj*. It's grilled chicken in *saj*, which is a type of flat bread."

"Works for me," Richie says, relieved not to have to make a decision. His eyes feel dry. He rubs at them behind his glasses.

"Me, too," Bev says immediately, followed by Ben and Mike. They all

put their menus down on top of Richie's and turn to Eddie, who is still perusing his grimly.

"Um, grilled chicken?" he asks slowly. Saleh nods. "Like, how grilled?"

Saleh frowns. "Uhh... it's grilled on a, um, spike thing. With spices."

"No, I mean, is it fully cooked through. Like, all the way. No pink."

Richie grins. "Dr. Kaspbrak is concerned about the *E. coli*."

"*E. coli* is not a fucking joke, dipshit."

"I'm sure the chicken here is fine, Eddie," Bev says. "It looks like a McDonald's or something, they probably have specific settings for how hot and for how long they cook everything."

"Yeah, and no one *ever* gets food poisoning from McDonald's," Eddie mutters.

"I mean, they don't?" says Ben after a beat. Eddie narrows his eyes at him, and Ben looks like he regrets speaking up. "Like for how many people eat there, I mean. Or at least you never hear about it." He runs a hand through his staticky blond hair again, making it stick up everywhere, like a bale of hay.

"That's because they hush it up," Eddie insists.

Ben looks confused. "They hush it up?"

"Yeah, didn't you know, Haystack?" Richie leans in conspiratorially towards Ben, who looks briefly surprised by the nickname. "The fast food mafia will order a hit on you if even *think* about vomiting after you eat a McMuffin."

Ben, Bev, Mike, and Saleh laugh. Richie glances at Eddie with a grin, ready for him to get on his case for not taking the seedy underworld of food journalism seriously.

After a brief moment, though, Eddie's shoulders relax from around his ears, and he actually huffs out a laugh. "Yeah, all right, that's

probably not true,” he admits, almost to himself. “You know what? I’ll have the same thing, too.” He gives a half-smile to the table and puts his menu on the pile with the others.

Bev catches Richie’s gaze with hers and raises an eyebrow. Richie blinks back at her, acknowledging her meaning.

That was something different for Dr. Kaspbrak.

Saleh puts in their food and drink orders for them, although he makes sure they know he’s only taking pity on them because they’re all jetlagged. Soon enough they’ll be fending for themselves in Arabic.

The *shawarma saj* looks a little like a flat grilled chicken burrito cut into bite-sized pieces, and includes a side of fries with mayonnaise and pickled carrots and cucumbers. It’s *delicious*. Richie didn’t realize how ravenous he was until the plate was in front of him, but he’s quickly inhaling it.

“This is awesome, Saleh, thanks,” Mike says earnestly. The rest of them, including Eddie, nod emphatically.

“It’s hard to go wrong with grilled chicken in bread,” Saleh says modestly. “And you can get shawarma at lots of places in Amman, so now you know at least one thing you like.”

“That’s smart. A man with a plan,” Bev says appreciatively. “It’s almost like you know what you’re doing, showing American students around.”

Richie looks across the table at Eddie, who has scarfed down most of his sandwich already. “How are you enjoying your *E. coli*, doctor?”

Eddie doesn’t even look up. “About as much as I’m enjoying how stupid you look with mayonnaise all over your face.”

“Yeah?” Richie says, waggling his eyebrows and pointedly not wiping his face. “Does it remind you of something else?”

Eddie turns red. “Shut the fuck up, asshole!”

Richie only laughs.

“So how long have you two been friends?” Mike asks.

“Since the beginning of linear time,” says Richie, around a mouthful of shawarma, just as Eddie says, “We’re not friends.”

Mike chuckles. “I feel like I know less now than I did before I asked.”

“All three of us only met today,” Bev explains. “We were on the same flight.”

Mike and Ben both blink and exchange a look. “Really?” asks Ben, looking back and forth between Richie and Eddie. “It seems like you’ve known each other forever.” Mike nods in agreement.

“It does feel like forever,” Richie says sweetly, putting a hand to his heart, just as Eddie rolls his eyes and groans, “It does feel like forever.”

Mike and Ben both laugh as Richie and Eddie’s heads immediately whip to face each other, Eddie glaring, Richie’s mouth falling open in excitement.

“Jinx!” Bev suddenly shouts, throwing a hand out across the table. “Jinx, jinx, *jinx*, motherfuckers, holy *shit*, a jinx on both your houses!”

“Can you technically jinx someone if you weren’t a part of the—?”

“Uh-uh, Richie, that’s gonna be two Cokes you owe me now,” Bev says, holding up a hand to stop him. “Although I guess that does count as me saying your name once. Dammit.”

Richie winks at her, mimes zipping his lips, and takes another bite of his shawarma. He glances over at Eddie, who looks like he wants to talk so badly that his mouth is twisted up like a Muppet’s. Richie chokes on his sandwich. Eddie shakes his head at him in disgust.

“So, now that we’ll finally get some peace and quiet, how about we have a normal-person conversation for once?” Bev says, turning to Ben and Mike. “What made you guys want to study abroad in

Jordan? I'm here as part of a project I'm doing on international fashion trends. My major's in fashion and marketing. What're yours?"

Yet again, Ben flushes a little under Bev's gaze. Richie wonders if he was that obvious when he first met Eddie, but he figures probably not. If he was, Eddie wouldn't want much to do with him.

"Um, mine is architecture," Ben mumbles, looking at his food.

"That's awesome!" Bev exclaims.

Richie gives an agreeing, "*Mm*," and nods. Bev shoots him a warning look, and he blinks innocently back at her.

She turns back to Ben. "What kind of architecture? Like modern or ancient or what? Keep in mind I know next to nothing about architecture, as if that dumb question didn't give it away." She laughs.

Ben laughs with her, encouraged. His face is profoundly gentle, Richie thinks, his blue-green eyes soft. "Um, usually modern, but last year I took a class on ancient architecture in the Middle East that I really liked. A lot of it was on ancient Egypt, but we also learned about mosque architecture and had a short unit on Petra, which was awesome. I took an Arabic 101 class last semester so I could come here and see it all myself."

"We're going to Petra on a field trip, right, Saleh?" Mike asks.

Saleh nods, swallowing his bite. "Yes, at the very end of the semester. It's a two-day trip, and we stay at a camp in the desert the night before Petra, so we want to wait until it's warmer."

"Go out with a bang, I like it," Bev says. "But I guess you'll have to wait until then to have that dream fulfilled, huh, fellow new kid?"

"We'll be going to other ancient architectural sites before then," Saleh says kindly to Ben. "And tomorrow you'll see the amphitheater and citadel in Amman."

"Yeah, I'm excited to see those," says Ben, enthusiasm truly creeping into his voice now. "Plus I'd really like to do some more traveling

while I'm here, if I can."

"You definitely can. Last semester students went to Israel, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria..."

"Oh, cool!" Ben's eyes are truly lit up now; he looks like a different person. Animated, handsome. Richie sees Bev smile. "I wasn't sure if we were allowed to go to other countries. I'd love to go to Syria, see Damascus, Aleppo, Palmyra..."

"Mmm!" Richie hums loudly, his lips still tightly closed. "Mm, mmm!"

Bev cocks her head. "Huh, that's weird. Does someone hear something?"

"Mmm!"

Saleh glances at him. "So he's not allowed to talk until..."

"I say his name three times." Bev gives Richie a Cheshire-cat grin and turns away. "Now then, Mike, I believe it's your turn to tell us all about yourself..."

Richie groans into his hands. He's happy conversation is moving along comfortably, but it's hurting his head not to be able to speak.

He hears a snicker across the table from him and looks up. Eddie has a gigantic smirk on his face, arms crossed and one eyebrow raised haughtily, like he's enjoying Richie's pain immensely. He looks like the hottest jerk in the world. Richie wants to wipe that smile off his fucking face.

Richie grins back at Eddie before darting out a hand and stealing a handful of his fries. Eddie yelps immediately, and in an instant his hand is gripping Richie's wrist, trying to pull the fries back. "Hey, asshole, those aren't—"

"Man, I am really racking up the Cokes," Bev says loudly.

Eddie's mouth snaps shut, but his eyes don't leave Richie's, and he doesn't stop trying to wrench Richie's hand back. Richie leans his

open mouth down toward the fries, biting at the air, trying to get close enough. But Eddie reaches his other hand out and grabs the fries themselves, crushing them into greasy potato pulp with a gloating noise in his throat—*if I can't have them, no one can!*—so Richie snakes his neck forward and licks a wet stripe up Eddie's salty, greasy fingers.

Eddie lets out a strangled noise and yanks both hands back to his chest, while Richie scoops up the crushed fries and shoves them in his mouth. Eddie gags at the sight.

"Honestly, it's more of a disruption than them talking," remarks Ben, sipping his juice.

"And you seriously only met today?" Mike laughs. Eddie glares at him; Richie gives him a peace sign and smiles toothily, fries in his mouth.

"Please, everyone, just ignore them, they're only doing it for the attention." Eddie lets out an indignant noise, so Bev amends: "Sorry, *Richie's* only doing it for the attention." Richie lets out a wordless, triumphant exclamation, and she groans. "Ah, fuck, only one more and he's free. Michael, please, go on, we don't have much time." She puts her chin in her hands, her attention fully on Mike.

"I'm a double major, religion and history," Mike says. "I'm doing my thesis on historical Muslim-Christian relations."

Saleh raises his head suddenly. "Oh, that's right, that was you," he says, nodding. "I remember reading your application. There's another student this semester who's also interested in religion—Stan. We think you two might make good roommates, actually."

"Oh, so you already decided who's going to be roommates with who?" Ben asks.

Saleh shakes his head. "We just have some preliminary ideas based on people's applications, interests... Nothing is set in stone quite yet," he says. "We wanted to wait to meet people before making final decisions, in case any personalities were found to be, um, incompatible." He pointedly does not look at Richie and Eddie, but

everyone else does.

Richie puts a hand to his chest in mock outrage. “Mm, mm?” Eddie kicks him under the table, his arms crossed, and Richie kicks him back.

“Okay, Bev, I think you need to release them from this bondage,” Mike says, laughing. “They seem to be transitioning from verbal sparring to physical. Besides, I’d love to know everyone’s story for coming to Jordan for study abroad.”

Bev sighs and rolls her eyes. “Ugh, fine. Eddie, Eddie, Eddie.”

“Finally,” Eddie breathes, sitting up straight. “Thanks.”

Richie turns in his chair to face Bev, who is not looking at him. He stares at Bev, unblinking, for several stretching seconds. She takes a sip of her soda. Richie widens his eyes. They’re watering but he’s committed to the bit.

She opens her mouth. “So, Eddie, what brings *you* to Jordan?”

“MMMM!?”

Eddie smirks at Richie’s frustration. “Nothing particularly interesting,” he says. “I’m an international business and management major, and we had to choose a foreign language as a requirement.”

Richie allows his head to fall back and lets out a loud snore. Mike stifles a laugh.

“I *said* it wasn’t particularly interesting, dickwad. It’s not funny if I already said it.”

“You go to the same school as Bill Denbrough, right?” Saleh asks.

Richie lifts his head back up and sees Eddie nod. “Yeah, that’s right. We were in the same Arabic class. Is he back in Amman yet?”

“Actually, he never left. He might be around the AmmanAbroad offices tomorrow; he’s been coming in most days for the internet.”

“Oh, cool. I’m looking forward to seeing him.”

Without thinking, Richie kicks at Eddie’s shin, just hard enough to get him to look over. Once Eddie’s eyes are on him, he’s not sure what to do. He ends up lewdly sticking his tongue into his cheek a couple times.

Eddie grimaces at him. “You’re disgusting.”

Richie just shrugs, smiles, and looks away.

“Why Arabic, though?” Ben asks. “It’s an unusual language to choose. Why not, like, Spanish? Or Mandarin?”

Eddie shifts in his seat. “I dunno what made me choose Arabic,” he says, picking at a thumbnail. “Call it a whim, I guess. But I ended up liking it a lot. I like the grammar system. Like, how the roots work and everything.”

“I really like how the writing looks,” Bev says, her chin in her hand. “I got a nice calligraphy pen before I started the class, but I wasn’t prepared for how shitty my handwriting would look going right-to-left for the first time. I’ve been too embarrassed to use it.”

“If you’re interested in calligraphy, we can try to ask someone to come to the office and show you how Arabic calligraphy is done,” Saleh offers.

“That would be awesome,” says Bev. Ben and Richie nod, too.

Saleh pulls out a Blackberry and starts typing. “Great, I’ll let Huda know that’s something you’re interested in.”

“Well, I think that’s everyone,” says Mike. “At least, everyone who’s allowed to speak.” He glances at Richie. Richie sits up in his seat, turning eagerly to Bev.

“Oh, there’s no need to release this one from the jinx just yet,” Bev says, waving a hand. “I already know he’s a theater major.” Richie’s face falls dramatically, and he clutches at Bev’s sleeve, doing his best impression of Oliver Twist. She laughs. “As if you couldn’t tell.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Ben chuckles. Richie tips an imaginary hat to him.

“Wait, you’re a theater major?” Eddie asks incredulously. He frowns at Richie. “Why the fuck is a theater major studying Arabic in Jordan?”

Richie smiles and mimes locking his lips and throwing away the key.

“I feel like there are lots of reasons a theater major would study abroad,” Ben muses. “Having new experiences, meeting new people...”

“What good is that supposed to be?”

“I don’t know. Isn’t that part of, like, ‘Method’ acting or whatever?”

“The fuck is that?”

“Learning a new language could help you with your voice,” Bev suggests. “Arabic has lots of different sounds. You learn how to move different parts of your mouth and throat.”

“How would that help you with acting?”

“Maybe he wants to be a voice actor.”

Eddie snorts. “Yeah, he’s got a face for fucking radio.”

Richie puts a hand to his chest indignantly. “Mm!?”

“He could be trying to find out what people here think is funny. Or sad, or romantic,” Mike says. “What things are culture-specific and what are universal.”

“There’s no way this idiot thought everything out enough for that.”

“Maybe he has hidden depths, Eddie,” Mike laughs. “Apparently you only just met him today, although I still find it hard to believe.”

“Hidden depths? Yeah fucking right. I’d have an easier time believing he just spun a globe and jabbed a finger at it and that was that.”

All of them look at Richie, who is slouched in his chair, arms crossed, smiling back.

“Well? Are any of these the reason you’re studying Arabic?” Bev asks. “You can just nod, or, like, point to the person who got it right.”

Richie only shrugs. He gestures to his closed mouth helplessly.

“Ugh, of course,” she says, rolling her eyes. “What do you think guys? Should I lift the curse?”

Ben and Mike nod. Bev raises an eyebrow at Eddie, who, after a second, sighs. “Yeah, fine,” he says. “I want to know what the fuck a theater major gets out of this.”

“Very well, then,” says Bev. She pretends to wave a wand at Richie. “I release you from the jinx... *Richard*.”

Richie lets out a dramatically big breath, as though he’s been holding it this whole time. He opens his mouth to speak, but before he gets a word out, Eddie holds up a hand to stop him.

“But before you start being all *Richie* again,” he says, “please just answer our one question—seriously—and give us one good reason why the fuck a fucking theater major would be studying Arabic in Jordan.”

“Oh, I thought that would’ve been obvious, Eds. I’m out for the most coveted part there is in Hollywood, for the juiciest, most prestigious, most Oscar-baity of roles.” Richie grins at everyone around the table. “I want to be in the next *Dune* reboot.”

Laughing, he holds his arms over his head to protect himself from the barrage of balled-up napkins thrown his way.

Dinner ends shortly after. Saleh takes them to a nearby grocery store on the way back to the hotel so they can get any necessities. It turns out that Ben is actually a big fan of the *Dune* books—which Richie mostly read because the 1984 movie was so fucking weird—so he and Richie chat about the series throughout the store, Eddie trailing behind them and asking incredulous questions whenever they touch on a particularly improbable plot point.

“Wait, he *turns into a giant worm?*”

“Well, he fully joins with it over the course of three thousand years...”

“Yeah, he’s like three thousand years old, Eds, he turns into a worm. Get off his worm-dick.”

“Pretty sure that’s not how that works. And don’t call me Eds.”

By the time they get back to the hotel, Richie is swaying on his feet, feeling punch-drunk and near dead, running only on fumes. It turns out he’s sharing with Mike, at least for orientation, and mercifully Mike doesn’t mind Richie listening to music while they get ready for bed, because there’s no way he can carry on any more conversation to fill the silence.

Teeth brushed, Richie crawls under the covers and drags a pillow over, crushing it to his chest. He turns off the music on his laptop and turns on his iPod, tucking an earbud into his upturned ear. In the other bed, Mike reaches out and turns off the light.

Richie expects to fall asleep right away, but in the dark, the Shins playing softly in his ear, he thinks back to dinner, to something Mike said. It turns in his head, over and over, keeping him from slumber.

Finally, he whispers, “Hey, Mike?”

Mike doesn’t answer for several seconds, but finally Richie hears a muffled, “Yeah?”

“What made you think Eddie and I had been friends for a long time?”

Mike pauses. “I don’t know,” he murmurs. His voice is just as tired as Richie’s; he sounds halfway in a dream already. “Something about the way you guys were with each other. It felt comfortable, and, um, easy. It fit. Like...”

Mike doesn’t continue the thought for long enough that Richie thinks he’s fallen back asleep mid-sentence. Richie shifts and is about to roll over, when he hears Mike’s gravelly voice again, sighing in sleep.

“Like... like holding hands.”

Richie feels warm all over. Mike’s words glow in his chest, lighting him up from the inside. When he eventually falls asleep—and *if you’d took to me like a / gull takes to the wind*—he dreams of holding a soft, warm hand in his, their fingers salty and sliding through.

Notes for the Chapter:

the song playing from richie’s ipod at the beginning is “hang me up to dry” by cold war kids, which to me is such a canonical young losers’ club song that i wanted to put it in here. the lyrics at the end are from “new slang” by the shins. oh and the chapter title is from “touches you” by MIKA; chapter one’s was from “somewhere only we know” by keane, which was almost the title of this fic.

i’m not sure what the social cachet of *dune* is these days, but the 1984 movie is still one of the most bizarre wonders of cinema ever and i feel like richie would enjoy it immensely.

did we learn any Arabic today, class? not really, i don’t think. When saleh gets mad at the cab driver he says, “three JD, seriously?” also manqousheh is a type of savory pastry with various ingredients, mutabbal is an eggplant dip (better than baba ghanoush, imo), and “dough meat” is a translation of lahme bi’ajeen, ground meat on a savory pastry. Oh, and technically richie’s not right about how fancy eddie sounds speaking MSA. it’s more like if he was using extremely proper newscaster speech—enough to get noticed by a cab driver, but not like he’s speaking old english or something. nevertheless, this is how i always imagined it sounding and it’s way funnier to me to think of it that way.

thanks as always to @jajs, my beta reader and the kwisatz haderach.

next time: richie and eddie share headphones! richie
gives eddie a new nickname!